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**Superpowers and conflict development: Is it a possible  
 relation for supporting human progress?**

*By* Mario COCCIA<sup>†</sup>

**Abstract.** This conceptual paper analyzes the role of superpowers that are nations with a high economic-war potential and the ability and expertise to exert influence on many geoeconomic regions at global level. Superpowers have a vital role in world systems with conflict development and resolution that are directed to achieve/sustain a global leadership to cope with consequential environmental threats and/or to take advantage of important economic opportunities worldwide. This role seems to generate economic, technological and social change and, as a consequence, human development in the long run.

**Keywords.** Great Power, War, Conflict, Resolution, Global Leadership, Empire, Imperialism.

**JEL.** N30, O30, O31, I23.

## 1. Introduction

Superpowers are nations with a high economic-war potential and the ability and expertise to exert influence on other geoeconomic regions at global level to achieve and/or support their global leadership also with conflict development and/or resolutions.

Superpowers or great powers or leader countries (these terms can be used interchangeably) have a scientific and technological superiority that plays a vital role during conflicts (cf., Coccia, 2015, 2017, 2017a, 2017b; Mendershausen, 1943; Smith, 1985). Stein & Russett (1980) argue that the strength of superpowers is due to a superior “military sophistication” that can support the final victory in wars. A better investigation of the role of superpowers needs to clarify the war economy and consequences associated with conflict development and resolutions (“resolution means to employ behaviour used in similar situations, adapted if necessary, so as to obtain an outcome that is good enough”, Ackoff & Rovin, (2003, p.9). In particular, international conflicts guided by superpowers influence negatively and/or positively some economic processes in a permanent way. In fact, superpowers can develop conflicts to have fruitful socioeconomic consequences in the long run (Mendershausen, 1943). Neurath (1919) showed the stimulating effect of conflicts developed by superpowers on long-run technical and organizational progress of countries (cf., Hirst, 1915, p. 3ff; Kramer *et al.*, 2009). Recently, some social scientists have paid more attention to effects of wars driven by superpowers on technology and economic growth (cf., Ruttan, 2006; Mowery, 2010; Coccia, 2018; Coccia, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011, 2014, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2015, 2015a, 2015b, 2017, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2018a, 2018b, Coccia & Benati, 2018; Coccia & Bellitto, 2018; Coccia & Cadario, 2014; Coccia & Rolfo, 2010; Coccia *et al.*, 2015). Conflict development by superpowers can

<sup>†</sup> Arizona State University, Interdisciplinary Science and Technology Building 1 (ISBT1) 550 E. Orange Street, Tempe- AZ 85287-4804 USA.

☎ + 85287-4804

✉ mario.coccia@cnr.it

support both technological innovations and other types of innovations (Coccia, 2015). For instance, income tax, an innovative fiscal model, is originated in England during Napoleonic wars for restructuring the finance of government for military requirements (cf., Gini, 1921, p.205). In general, global conflicts between superpowers generate major socioeconomic consequences and long-term structural change worldwide (Stein & Russett, 1980, p.401; cf., Rasler & Thompson, 1985). In particular, conflict development by superpowers generates demand- and supply-side effects for domestic economy and for economies of allied countries. The demand-side effects of conflicts are a huge demand shock based on a massive increase in deficit spending and expansionary policy (cf., Field, 2008). In fact, conflict establishes main technological, economic and infrastructural preconditions for an “age of high mass consumption” (Rostow, 1959, pp.11-13). The demand effects generated by conflicts are coupled to powerful supply-side effects: learning by doing in military production, spin-off and spillover from military R&D, etc. These factors suggest a positive effect of military conflicts on output, productivity and technological growth of superpowers and inter-related countries (cf., Baumol, 1986; Ruttan, 2006). For instance, Wright (1997, p.1565) examines the “American technological leadership” and shows that critical manufacturing sectors for U.S. economy have taken advantages from fruitful demand- and supply-side effects of conflicts. Superpowers influence profoundly economic systems worldwide and with conflict development and/or resolutions can generate economic shocks for participants and neutral nations (Goldstein, 2003, p.215). In fact, superpowers, developing conflicts, induce R&D investments to produce military technologies that are transferred to civilian applications in the long term. The mobilization of human and economic resources by superpowers for conflict development increases the rates of inventions and technological innovations that in the post-war period are diffused to support long-run economic growth (Stein & Russett, 1980, p.412; Coccia, 2015)<sup>1</sup>.

The consequences of conflict development and/or resolution also play a vital role in the distribution of power within international system (Modelskei, 1972; cf., Levy, 1983; 2011). As a matter of fact, the conflict development and/or resolution by superpowers can fundamentally change the hierarchy of power between nations in the international system (Modelskei, 1972, p.418). Modelskei (1972, p.48) asserts that the “war causes the Great Powers”, such as Roman Empire over 200BC ~ 400AD, Britain Empire in the 1710-1850 period, the USA from 1940s onwards, etc. (Stein & Russett, 1980).

Kindleberger (1989, p.203) argues that: The Thirty Years war from 1618 to 1648, culminating in the economic dominance of the Netherlands, from French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars from 1792 to 1815, ending in the Great Britain at the apex of the world economy, and the combined World Wars I and II, from 1914 to 1945 that led to the United States taking over as the world’s leading economic power

Several nations have lost their status of superpower or imperial leadership as result of conflicts (e.g. Austria-Hungary in 1918; Italy in 1944; Germany and Japan in 1945; cf., Stein & Russett, 1980). Major conflicts between superpowers produce changes in the global leadership of world economy and affect “hegemonic cycles”, which are longer than 150 years (Kindleberger, 1989, p.203ff; cf., Kennedy, 1987; Cipolla, 1970; Coccia, 2018; Olson, 1982). Hence, superpowers, winning international conflicts, can achieve and/or sustain a global leadership on wide geoeconomic regions (Coccia, 2015, p.203).

Linstone (2007, p. 115) states that: “the winner in each case became the leading global power, a new global political economy emerged, and democracy advanced” (cf., Devezas, 2006; Linstone, 2007a, 2010). In this context, superpowers are: “large-scale political organizations that might usefully be studied as complex

<sup>1</sup>cf., Coccia, 2005a, 2015b, 2016, 2017b, 2018e, 2018f

systems. But they are also products of their age, and must be examined in the context of their time and place” (Modelski, 2010, p.1418).

Modelski (2010, p.1419) also argues that:

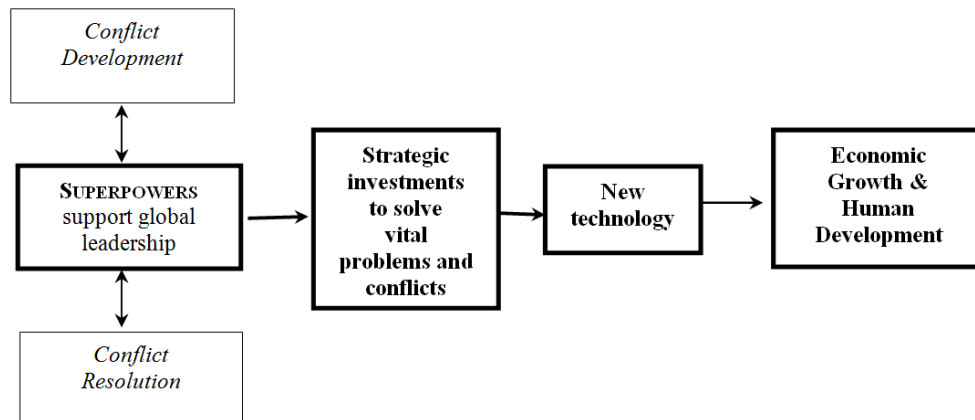
Empires are not the only form of large-scale political organization.... two other forms, global leadership (other terms used for it include hegemony – Greek for leadership – and global primacy), and ... global organization... (Britain) is a case of global leadership that toward the close of its trajectory exhibited imperial features. The United States, too, in relation to the world system, is an instance of global leadership. And global leadership can be seen as a transitional form evolving in the direction of enhanced global organization.

Ferguson (2010) notes that after the World War II, the U.S. assumes the global leadership, replacing U.K. and “shifting from an informal to a formal empire much as late Victorian Britain once did” (as quoted by Modelski, 2010, p.1419). As a matter of fact, Ferguson (2010) claims that the United States is similar to an Empire with a military, political, economic and technological leadership worldwide recognized. Instead, Modelski (2010, pp.1419-1420, original emphasis) argues that the United States have a network-based structure, which is oriented to long-distance trade in world system: “inclining at times to the temptations of ‘informal empire’ but in its basically non-imperial organization capable of responding flexibly to international crises... its proper name is global leadership, an evolutionary, and therefore transitional form capable of adaptation and self-transformation in response to mounting global problems”. Finally, imperial aspirations with conflict development of superpowers are impracticable in current world, which is increasingly global, complex, turbulent, rich, interconnected and multilevel; the only feasible strategy of superpowers with conflict development is to achieve/sustain a global leadership based on economic and technological performances higher than other competitive nations (cf. Modelski, 2010, p.1419ff).

## 2. A possible relation between superpowers, conflict development and human progress

In general, the conflict development by superpowers has several negative effects, but it also seems to have a crucial connection with the progress in society generated by strategic investments in science and technology to solve relevant problems and to achieve/support global leadership (Coccia, 2015). Stein & Russett (1980) argue that conflict is one of the engines that propels economic change and supports progress in society. The conflict development by superpowers appear to be necessary phases for human development, which is not a monotonous and linear but rather a disequilibrium process of the dynamics of world system (cf., Bobbio, 1965; Gini, 1921; 1959). The conflict development by superpowers can be also due to prove military and scientific superiority towards other belligerent nations. At the same time, conflict development by superpowers stimulates new technology and innovation that, after conflicts, can be spread in wide geoeconomic regions (Coccia, 2015). In fact, superpowers, under environmental tensions and consequential environmental threats, have the incentive to exploit, particularly, the newest and less known discoveries and inventions in science and technology (cf., Gini, 1921; Coccia, 2015). Hence, the technological progress of societies seems to be associated with socioeconomic shocks (e.g., international conflicts) governed by superpowers, which generate long-run structural change on wide socioeconomic systems (Coccia, 2015).

Technological change would be vastly different and economic development would be substantially delayed without strategic (also military and defense-related) investments for conflict development and resolution by superpowers to achieve/sustain a global leadership. In fact, relevant needs and strategic problems for supporting the global leadership of superpowers are a strong incentive for generating new technology, which supports social, technological and economic change (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Role of superpowers in conflict development and resolution for achieving and sustaining global leadership

Hence, the role of superpowers in conflicts development and resolution is associated with the purpose of global leadership that in the presence of (effective or potential) environmental threats can generate new technology and historical paths of development (Coccia, 2015, 2017, 2017a).

Overall, then, superpowerstend to be a vital driving force of social, technical and economic change that supports human development in society (Coccia, 2015).

### 3. Conclusion

Development and resolution of international conflictsbetween superpowers are a major agent of social change with effects on individuals, groups, nations, societies and international systems (Stein & Russett, 1980). In fact, Coccia (2015) shows that long-term evolution of societies and human development is a process of disequilibrium governed by purposeful superpowers directed to achieve/sustain global leadership also with conflict development.

In the context of a World-Systems Theory, superpowersgenerate a power hierarchy between core and periphery, in which powerful and wealthy "core" societies dominate and exploit weak peripheral societies (Wallerstein, 1974; cf., Skocpol, 1977). The role of superpowersis based on dominant capitalist classes that want state protection for industry and their control of international trade. In fact, capitalists within superpowers want, need, and get the extra-economic assistance to satisfy their world market opportunities and maximize profit of international trade (Skocpol, 1977, pp.1076-77).

An economic boundary of superpowers is high expenditures to copy with conflict development. The high military expenses can increase public debt, create socioeconomic problems and possible economic shocks within superpowers (cf., Ferguson, 2003; 2010). Kennedy (1987, pp.539-540) argues:

To be a great power—by definition, as a state capable of holding its own against any other nation—demands a flourishing economic base... Yet by going to war, or by devoting a large share of the nation’s “manufacturing power” to expenditures upon “unproductive” armaments, one runs the risk of eroding the national economic base... maintaining at growing cost the military obligations they had assumed in a previous period

Moreover, superpowersmay assume a worldwide role close to autocracy in order to sustain the global leadership with a behavior prone to a permanent “wartime” and strains in different geoeconomic regions (Linstone, 2007, p.237). Anyhow, superpowerscan also act as a worldwide referee for conflict resolution across nations to support geo-political equilibria and stability. Davis *et al.*, (2012, p.8) argue that: “The United States has an interest in dissuading military competition wherever it might arise... U.S. forward military presence displaying

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U.S. conventional superiority” (cf., [Posen, 2003](#); [The White House, 2010](#); [U.S. Department of Defence, 2012](#)).

Overall, then, superpowers have a vital role in world systems with conflict development and resolution that are directed to achieve/sustain global leadership to cope with consequential environmental threats and/or to take advantage of important economic opportunities worldwide. This role tends to generate economic, technological and social change and, as a consequence, human development in the long run.



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